Sketch

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Cambodia, Kansas

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— Cambodia, Kansas

When Tom and John Delaney's dad was killed in the late Spring of 1970 the war immediately seemed much closer than it ever had before, closer than the five year-long narrative continued every night at 5:30 by Chet and Dave on our old seventeen-inch black and white Zenith screen popping as its tubes warmed up, much closer. "Good night, David. Good night, Chet. Good night, Sergeant Delaney, and good night for NBC News." The war was right on our block of Otto
3 Avenue in Salina where we lived two houses down from Mrs. Delaney and her sons. Still others among my playground buddies, I think three more, lost their dads that same late Spring and early Summer as the war moved into Cambodia. It seemed that helicopters over there were dropping around the clock, because that's what each of their dads had been in, helicopters. Years later, another friend, Buck Trepoy, told me how his dad was nearly emasculated that same Spring when he fell out of a chopper doing a bank while he was standing in the open doorway hip-firing an M-14 rifle; nearly emasculated because he had landed in the fork of a tree some thirty feet below. You can imagine how he must've landed. Imagine also how Chet and Dave would've handled *that* news. "Three American soldiers were killed in action today in Cambodia, and yet *another* wishes that he had been." Good *night*.

Anyway, the war was that much more real for all of us kids, me and my buddies -- them especially. My own dad had retired from the Army in the early sixties, but their fathers were all overseas. The Delaneys and my other friends were all families of soldiers whose wives had been assigned to the military housing project in Salina, at the old Schilling Air Force Base. Several hundred families lived there waiting for their husbands and dads to come home.

We all played soldier anyway that summer and all of us hoped to be soldiers when we grew up, just like Dad. Even the Delaneys joined in as we prowled and patrolled around the neighborhood with plastic

cap-firing automatic rifles, some wearing scraps of their dads' old uniforms. I had a plastic Johnny Eagle M-14 that not only used caps but also actually *fired* little spring-loaded plastic bullets and ejected little plastic casings. With it, I was the envy of every kid on the block. All the other guys just had plastic M-16's that made a stupid rattling noise and broke easily, just like the real ones, my Dad had laughed.

He'd taught me to crudely aim my rifle, how to hold it with the sling around my left arm and actually *ping* plastic bullets off of little targets in the back yard. Dad was a great shot as the expert marksman badge indicated on the one old khaki uniform he had hanging high up in the back of his closet. I was jealous of him for that old badge and really practiced with my plastic rifle till *I* was pretty good too.

So although the war *did* seem like much more of a real thing that other kids' dads didn't come home alive from, it felt like all of us guys had a lot of fun anyway that Summer. Tom and John Delaney only had to stay inside with their mom for a couple of days. Not a month after Sergeant Delaney's death Tom rode his stingray bike by me there on Otto Avenue, grabbed my rifle out of my hands and pedalling up and down the block twice, emptied its plastic magazine right at me, himself with amazing accuracy, laughing his head off, and from a moving bike as well. I was very impressed.

The Summer went right on by like that and Fall came on and somewhere in there the fighting stopped in Cambodia or I guess our army went back to Vietnam and the whole war right back into our old seventeen-inch black and white Zenith with Chet and Dave. Also school started, and I was enrolled in Mrs. Bartell's fifth grade class at John F. Kennedy school, just three blocks from home.

I liked Mrs. Bartell a lot and tried like Hell to become class clown, but a good one, not an asshole. And I think I made it too because she really seemed to like me also. And what wasn't there to like? I was a good kid and a pretty good student, except in Math, which was forgivable. Like most of the other guys my best subjects were history and geography; unlike the others my very best subject was spelling. I was the hottest speller in the class, only once blowing a word in one embarrassing bee when I goofed on the word *vacation*. In my confident rush I left out the second *a*, spelling instead *vaction*. I was much more careful after that, though Mrs. Bartell never bothered me about it.

The one thing I *did* do that really bugged Mrs. Bartell was doodle, and I did that a lot. I drew cowboys, many of them, whole notebook pages of them and then I drew cowboys all over the cardboard backs of my Big Chief Tablets. All the time. But the thing was that I never really knew that this bothered her so much, until later, and it really did. I know now that she was so upset with my cowboy doodles and drawings that she eventually did some homework into the matter

and reached a conclusion that now all these years later still makes me shiver and lose sleep and just wonder about the whole thing, the whole September of that year, and particularly the afternoon I spent in Captain Cornell's office and drew pictures for *him*.

Mrs. Bartell had gone back through one of her books on abnormal behavior in schoolchildren and decided that I was over-aggressive. My obsession with cowboys proved that. Also I fell down a lot. I was well over five feet, almost as tall as her, and always tripping and falling. That was a part of it. I was really potentially quite violent she explained to my parents and might someday actually hurt somebody, or even me. At ten years of age I couldn't be responsible for myself, and she certainly couldn't be, but if Mom and Dad didn't do something about this then she would be *forced* to, and that was all. That was where Captain Cornell came in.

"Draw a picture," Captain Cornell instructed. We were sitting on the carpet of his office, Indian-style on a Monday afternoon of that September.

"Of what?" I asked, looking at him, at how stupid he looked sitting Indian-fashion on the floor in his summer khaki uniform, his black shoes awkwardly tucked under his legs.

"Oh, of a man," he casually replied, looking back at me, however I appeared to him that afternoon.

5 Mom and Dad had called the base medical dispensary at Schilling after talking with Mrs. Bartell. The medics had looked at me first, given me a brief physical — clothes off and everything, right down to "turn your head and cough." I swear it. At ten years old, my short arm was probably nothing of the scale they must've seen in the past, but they were impressed with my hernia scars. I'd forgotten all about them.

"When did this happen?" the head medic had asked, politely pointing. He had a big and obviously old silver pocket watch dangling out of the pants pocket of his white utilities.

"When I was three," I'd shrugged proudly with a zip. And they'd sent me to Captain Cornell.

So I sat on Captain Cornell's carpet and without hardly even thinking drew a picture. I drew a man. I drew a cowboy, boots first, then chaps and gunbelt, vested torso, handle-bar moustache, and an enormous hat.

Captain Cornell looked at the picture when I was through, nodding like that was just right, just what he wanted. I'd like to remember that he'd even said "good," but I can't.

"Now draw a woman," that's what he'd said.

I thought on this one. I had to because I'd never drawn a woman before. Who in the Hell would I draw? Mom? Mrs. Bartell? I couldn't draw any particular faces and besides, all my cowboys naturally had big noses to match their moustaches. Neither Mom or Mrs. Bartell had a

big nose, certainly not a moustache.

I drew a cowboy with a slightly smaller nose, no moustache, and with modest breasts pushing out from beneath his shirt and vest. Modest, not buxom or voluptious, but unmistakeably breasts.

"Click," I'd practically heard it. *Click.* I looked across at Captain Cornell as he scrutinized my drawing and then, with a warm smile, me. *Click.*

"Oh Hell," I thought, looking at him there. "Oh Hell, oh shit, oh fuck, fuck, fuck," I thought as he smiled over to me — words I'd never said but that were suddenly springing into my head automatically. I knew what had happened; I knew what I had done. I knew, I think, what he was thinking. I know *now* that I knew because since then I've put Psych 103 under my belt and know the theory behind the basic, elementary DAP Test, the *D*raw *A P*icture Test. I knew I was fucked. *That's* what I thought.

Captain Cornell explained: I had cowboys on the brain — men were cowboys; women were just cowboys with breasts, no moustaches, and smaller noses. Cowboys anyway. Maybe Captain Cornell was a cowboy too?

Well, he wasn't, not by any means, I knew that. He was just him and I hated his guts, sitting there across from me. I wished that I had my trusty Johnny Eagle M-14 with me that I could pull it out from behind me and empty its plastic clip of plastic bullets right into his warm-smiling face, which I can really no longer remember, except for that smile. To empty it, ping, ping, ping, laughing at him, like Tom Delaney, I guess. But I didn't have it, of course. So instead Captain Cornell and I went over to the post gymnasium and he gave me my first fencing lesson.

Fencing, Captain Cornell explained to me before we left his office, was a good way to let out all of the built-up aggression a guy just naturally had inside of him. It was real invigorating, he said. And also, he thought it was kind of relaxing too. You felt good when you were done, I'd see that.

So we walked over to the gym, down into its basement and still lower through a pretty confusing chain of stairways, down to a large indoor court of some kind with big mats all over the floor. Here for over an hour Captain Cornell showed me the fundamentals of fencing, the basic movements of parries and thrusts that you had to know just to be able to pick up a foil, it seemed. I learned a variety of French terms that really *did* impress me. And we finally put on masks and with foils in our hands went onto the mat. I had picked a particularly nice-looking foil that had a heavy knuckle guard on it, looking more like a sabre or sword because of this, and we jumped around for a good fifteen minutes, thrusting and parrying, and although I was tall and kind of awkward, I like to think I held my own, for a rookie, anyway.

But I still didn't like Captain Cornell. I still hated his fucking guts.

Mom, it turned out, knew I would be there at the post gym and was waiting outside for me in her old white Rambler stationwagon. Remember the goofy transmissions those things had? She smiled as she put it in gear there in front of the gym and asked me what kind of an afternoon I'd had. I told her that I'd really had a lot of fun and that Captain Cornell was a real good guy and that he showed me how to fence.

"You know," I said, "sword-fight."

She thought that was great. I said I thought so too and we drove home like that, just great, and she was so happy and proud of me that she couldn't wait to tell Dad when he got home from work. She really couldn't wait to tell him how I'd made such good friends with Captain Cornell and he was teaching me fencing.

Dad was real proud too. He and Mom both sat across from me at the kitchen table the next day at lunch while I told them all about my first fencing lesson, all the parries and thrusts and how I needed to practice over the next week so that I'd be ready for my second lesson with Captain Cornell next Monday afternoon. They thought that was great.

Dad *really* did. He stood up from the table, then, and began wondering about what I could use as a foil to practice with for that week. We all worked on this for several minutes and rattled off some possibilities as they came to us. My first idea of Mom's big foot-long German butcher knife was immediately thrown out, along with my idea of Dad's big long standard mechanic's screwdriver. Dad didn't think that we had any dowel rods around the house that would do the trick, and a short search proved this to be true. He'd even ran out to our tin shed behind the house to check.

Then, back again in the kitchen, Dad remembered his barbecuer's rotisserie, the thirty-inch long steel rod with a wooden handle on one end that went with his barbecuer for chickens and roasts. That would work fine, and it was right there in the kitchen, in the cabinet under the stove. In a second Dad reached down, opened this cabinet and brought out the rotisserie, my foil.

Right there on the spot I put on a little demonstration. With what I thought was real finesse I jumped around the kitchen wielding my foil, showing them what I'd learned so far. They laughed, and Mom clapped her hands because they thought it was all just great.

So for the next week, from that Tuesday on, every afternoon after school I danced and jumped all around our back yard there on Otto Avenue, practicing my parries and thrusts, trying not to throw in a lot of trashy Hollywood stuff, being serious about it. My Johnny Eagle M-14 was stacked in my closet, and there were no more cowboy

doodles in the classroom. It was serious now, fencing, and I had to be ready for Captain Cornell who would be waiting for me at the post gym at Schilling Monday afternoon, after school.

And I *was* ready for him, you bet, when Monday afternoon rolled back around. I was master of the rotisserie, had mastered it, it surely five, maybe ten times heavier than the average foil. Heavy *not* down in the handle where it might've been more important, but heavy along its length, its thirty inches of stainless steel, shiny as Hell from when Dad had cleaned it with steel wool after the last time he'd used it, on a chicken or a roast. And that was the sort of treatment I had in mind for Captain Cornell that same afternoon. First I would slash through that damn mask at his face and that fucking smile of his, that first. And then, next, in just my second move, and after the first it would be easy, I would thrust up and into his damn khaki gut — run him through, skewer him, and *that* would be it. *Boy* would he be surprised. Dead on the mat with his mask slashed, him disembowelled and dead. "Wasted," was the word the Delaney boys used. I'd tear my own mask off, throw it down at him, and also hurl my rotisserie or foil down at his corpse, dead, and say with a bitter laugh, *"There!"*

Mom dropped me off from her Rambler in front of the gym at four o'clock or so that Monday after school. I walked up the sidewalk and into the place. It really was a Hell of a building. The Army had really knocked themselves out when they built it back in the forties and then in the fifties the Air Force had come along and done even more, adding on a new wing with more basketball courts and deepening the basement to include a huge fallout shelter. It was immense, there was no doubt about that.

That afternoon the place was full to capacity it seemed with kids and soldiers and airmen, busy in every room, running around in sweatsuits and basketball outfits — busy with just about every indoor sport imagineable. I began walking down the first flight of stairs I found, on my way to the room down there where Captain Cornell would be waiting for me after a week. I walked down the first couple of stairways to where an Air Force sergeant was trying to organize a bunch of kids roughly my age, each with a bow and a tubular quiver of arrows on his back. This wasn't the right place.

And I'll go ahead and tell you now that I never did find him. I never saw Captain Cornell again. I went down every side hallway I could find in that gymnasium. I saw what seemed like hundreds of kids and soldiers and airmen shooting baskets, playing handball, wrestling, practicing archery, everything. But I never found Captain Cornell. And finally after about forty-five minutes I quit looking. I walked back up all the stairways to the foyer of the gym and waited for Mom to show up out front in her Rambler at five o'clock to pick me up. She was right on time.

As I got into the stationwagon she slipped the car into gear and smiled over at me, both at the same time.

"Well how did it go?" she asked and looked back onto the road, Jumper Road I believe it was, as she pulled out away from the curb.

"It was okay," I said and looked down at the floor mat and my feet down there.

She looked at me there on the wide seat beside her and paused for a moment before shifting again, just looking at me.

"Okay?" she asked.

"Yeah, I guess so," and I looked up to the jagged metal lock on the glove compartment where my sister Sara had cut her head open years before when we'd been tailgated at Fort Sill.

"You don't really want to go back, do you?" We were at a stop sign there on Jumper Road, a four-way stop.

"No," I said, but I couldn't look at her. I think I looked at the ashtray. And I never did go back.

Well, of course, two years and about three or four months later the American war in Vietnam was all over anyway, in Vietnam, and it turned out Cambodia and Laos also, I think. And about three years and some months after that it was all *really* over. But back before this last, back when the last of my buddies' dads were coming home, on the night in January when it ended, we had a little Pepsi Cola party in my room there in our house on Otto Avenue, me and one of the three or so guys that were still around, Dennis Schmidt. Dennis had even brought a National Geographic map of Southeast Asia along. His dad was somewhere in Thailand, where there wasn't much fighting.

Although I kept on doodling cowboys now and then, I never dragged my plastic Johnny Eagle M-14 out of the closet again. As it happened in the November after my session with Captain Cornell, my cousin Kenny broke the leading portion of the barrel off, just above the stacking swivel, and also cracked the sliding bolt cover over the breech — my cousin Kenny whose dad had died in the Mekong Delta a horrible death of mutilations still not talked about in the family. The sergeant who'd escorted the casket out from Frisco, at the time, tried to get Dad to drink with him. "Come on, Top. What the Hell." Dad wouldn't. Anyway, I wasn't home when Kenny broke it. And it's still in the same closet, probably all gray with dust and lint by now. In there with the air rifle I never tried to kill anything with and my old Winchester twenty-two that I never *could* kill anything with.

But still, all these years later, every now and then — not a half dozen times total — I allow myself a sort of primal howl. It's on those awful nights or terrible cold mornings when I'm all alone and have maybe had too much beer that this happens. I let myself have just this one brief and pleasurably frightening revenge fantasy played out like on a seventeen-inch black and white Zenith in my head. I finally go

after him.

If he's still in the Army, he's a colonel by now, certainly a lieutenant-colonel. If he's now in civilian practice, then that's irrelevent. But here it is: I get out of my car in front of his house, wherever he lives, a spacious dozen-room job, at about six P.M. when he will have already had two or maybe three dry Gordon's martinis with the evening news. I take out of the car with me a *real* M-14, now the re-designated Springfield M1A Match Rifle chambered for the NATO round, heavy, about nine or ten pounds with a dark walnut stock just barely oozing cosmoline where wood meets metal, the steel all blued and glistening, the stock lucent with linseed oil, holding it from the hip like Buck Trepoy's dad, the sling around my left arm like my Dad showed me. I walk up the front walk, slowly, with the rifle like this, with a full twenty-round clip of dum-dummed bullets. I knock on the door, patiently, knocking patiently until Captain Cornell finally opens it.

Then, with the switch on full auto, in very much less time than it takes to read or write this, I empty the whole clip into his warm smiling face and down into his khaki-covered guts, throw the piece down at his body there on the stoop and say with a bitter laugh, "*There!*" that's it. "Good night, Chet. Good night, David. Good night, Captain Cornell."